

A recipe for continuous improvement



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For the past year I've been very intrigued by the concept of creating an organization where a majority of the employees are motivated and confident in making frequent small improvements within their respective areas of expertise.

Termed Managing for Daily Improvement, this is generally considered to be the "secret sauce" for a true Lean culture.

Like most things associated with cooking up a great culture, the majority of the key ingredients for establishing successful MDI must be supplied by management.

The most important management behavior is to be intentional about improvement. This means ensuring regular, specific blocks of time are scheduled for all employees — including all levels of management — to work on improvements. This sends a clear message that improvement is "part of the job" as opposed to "something we do in our free time." Besides, who has free time?

Being deliberate about spending time with employees during or immediately after their scheduled improvement time provides an opportunity to become familiar with new improvements, recognize successes and address barriers.

It also sends a clear expectation that improvement time is to be used wisely since employees know they will have to make an account for themselves.

Emphasize small improvements that are within each employee's sphere of influence. Sure, occasionally a big project requiring multi-disciplinary support and perhaps special funding will surface, but that isn't where we want the primary focus. The goal is daily sustainable improvements. Examples of some of my recent, simple improvements include:

- Unsubscribing from an unwanted email list that sent monthly updates.
- Removing infrequently used and obsolete keys from my key chain.
- Clearly distinguishing metric tools from their English counterparts in my toolbox.
- Relocating a frequently used utensil to a more convenient location in the kitchen.
- Tweaking a spreadsheet to make it more user-friendly.

Finally, another leadership behavior to promote continuous improvement is to religiously share success stories. This accomplishes two things. First, it recognizes those individuals who are doing the right thing. Second, it provides improvement ideas for others. My key chain improvement came from another leader sharing this idea.

Employees also must bring some vital ingredients to the daily improvement mix. They should be able to identify waste in their work, those steps in the process that take time and consume resources, but don't

positively impact the customer's experience with the product or service.

Often, waste can be found by simply being attuned to what bugs you. ("Why do I grab the wrong wrench 90 percent of the time, when there are only two choices? I'm going to mark the metric wrench so it's obvious.")

Once waste is identified, employees need to be inquisitive and not simply accept that's the way it is. They should be willing to ask, "Why?" or "What if ...?" This requires that they possess an appropriate balance of an inner drive to challenge the status quo with an ability to recognize their sphere of influence. It also means they should possess a basic problem solving process.

How does one go about hiring those qualities? By making them part of the selection criteria during the hiring process. Example interview questions might include:

- Tell me about a problem that you recently solved or a process you improved? How did you become aware of the opportunity?
- How do you go about trying to solve a problem?
- What is a small problem or issue that you are working on?
- How do you react when a small problem within your control frustrates you?

Establishing a healthy continuous improvement culture isn't rocket science. It's simple common sense. The test is having the confidence, trust and discipline to set aside time regularly for your organization to improve.

Based on the rarity of organizations that have mastered continuous improvement, it's safe to say that's not easy.

RICK SAYS

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